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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 003073

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PK](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: ZARDARI TO PARLIAMENT: "I HAVE A DREAM FOR
PAKISTAN"

REF: A. ISLAMABAD 2941
[1](#)B. ISLAMABAD 2906
[1](#)C. ISLAMABAD 2664

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On September 20, a smiling but nervous President Asif Zardari addressed in English a packed joint sitting of parliament. This was the first time a Pakistani President had addressed the parliament in eight years; Zardari pledged to respect the supremacy of parliament and called for "revisiting" the 17th constitutional amendment under which Musharraf had transferred key powers from the Prime Minister to the President. Saying he had crossed "a river of blood and tears" to become President, Zardari said he was humbled to be addressing the parliament but wished his martyred wife Benazir was standing in his place. There were no real surprises in the speech, but Zardari reached out to constituencies in the tribal areas, Balochistan, the civil service, agriculture and women. He offered an olive branch both to "brotherly" Afghanistan and to India. He mentioned the U.S. only once, in a reference to working with allies to strengthen regional security. Cabinet members, Supreme Court justices, top military leaders, governors and rivals, including Nawaz Sharif, attended what was a pro-western message of political reconciliation. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Speaking in English for just 30 minutes and interrupted by applause several times, President Asif Zardari addressed September 20 a joint session of the federal parliament (Senate and National Assembly), with the cabinet, military chiefs, political party leaders, judges and diplomatic corps in attendance. Having a picture of his late wife Benazir Bhutto placed at his side on the podium, Zardari noted her "martyrdom for the cause of democracy." While not mentioning former President Pervez Musharraf by name, he noted that "under dictatorship" no Pakistani President had addressed parliament in eight years.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Zardari reached out to several constituencies by pledging to empower local government, support an independent judiciary, improve relations with Balochistan, change the name of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) to Pakhtoonkhwa (a line that generated surprisingly loud applause), revise the Frontier Crimes Regulations, provide crop insurance for farmers, raise civil service salaries, protect media freedoms, restore trade unions, permit women to hold land titles for the first time, and protect religious minorities.

¶4. (SBU) Zardari pledged to support the supremacy of the parliament and called for the Speaker to form an all parties' committee to "fix the distortions in the Constitution made by military dictators." Zardari said he supported "revisiting" Musharraf's 17th Amendment to the Constitution and citing specifically the President's powers under Article 58(2)(b) to dissolve the National Assembly.

Fighting Militancy

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¶5. (U) Saying "we must root out terrorism and extremism wherever and whenever it may rear its ugly head," he reiterated the GOP's three-pronged strategy against terrorism: (1) negotiations with those who prove they truly desire peace; (2) an extensive social development program; and, (3) the use of force, but only as a last resort. The loudest applause line came when Zardari promised that Pakistani territory would never be used as a base of attack against other countries nor would "other powers" be allowed to trample Pakistan's sovereignty. He avoided citing the U.S. by name. Zardari requested that the Speaker convoke a joint sitting of parliament where the government could provide an in camera briefing on national security.

The Economy

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¶6. (SBU) Saying the greatest challenge Pakistan faces is an economic one, Zardari acknowledged the shocks in the petroleum and other commodities markets that forced the GOP

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to cut energy subsidies; the existing energy shortfall would "not be solved in just one month" but would be solved in one year, he promised. Noting the average Pakistani's struggle to put food on the table, he called for first-ever crop insurance to ensure food security throughout the country. He reiterated plans to help the poor through the Benazir Income Support Scheme and promised to increase civil servant salaries. He also pledged to stabilize the balance of payments by reducing luxury imports and aggressively enhancing exports.

Neighbors

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¶7. (SBU) Zardari noted that Afghan President Hamid Karzai was specially invited to his September 9 swearing in. Both countries needed to cooperate more. Zardari expressed a "sincere desire for brotherly relations" with Afghanistan. The GOP would also resume the Composite Dialogue with India, liberalize the visa process, expand trade across the Line of Control with Kashmir, and convoke an all parties' caucus to seek solutions to disputes over Kashmir. He also called for strengthening brotherly relations with China and Iran, defended the Palestinian cause, and supported working with the U.S. and Europe to strengthen regional security.

Initial Reaction

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¶8. (SBU) Immediately after the speech, Nawaz Sharif spoke to the gathered press, saying he doubted the judiciary would be fully restored. Sharif's representative and Opposition Leader Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan added: "Zardari gave a standard speech," without any important decisions announced. Coalition partner Awami National Party (ANP) leader Asfundyar Wali Khan stated: "It is good to note that President Zardari talked about provincial autonomy," though he hoped this would also include financial autonomy.

¶9. (C) Comment: A smiling but nervous Zardari delivered a solid pro-western speech that included nothing new but did demonstrate his desire for political reconciliation. Given his coalition's slim six seat margin in the National

Assembly, reconciliation will be important to staying in power. It appears Zardari will cede to the Prime Minister the power to dissolve the National Assembly but may keep his powers to appoint military commanders, governors and judges. A reasonable distribution of power between the President and the Prime Minister would be a healthy change, in principle, for Pakistan's democracy, although we have yet to see how Zardari plans to use his powers of appointment. All in all, this was a solid speech; as an effort to reassure a public which doubts Zardari's bona fides, it was a good start. End comment.

PATTERSON